

Lent 4—C
James 4:7-10
“Resist the devil”

When I opened my mailbox, a Playboy advertisement was inside. This was not the best day for my wife to be standing right there looking at what I was holding in my hands. “Why are you getting that?” she asked. “I don’t know” was my answer. I still don’t know. That was the only one I got, mercifully. Maybe I’m too spiritual, but I think the enemy was just trying the one thing he thought would work.

Because that’s what enemies do, right? When someone wants to win, when someone wants to beat you, they find the weakness and they do it again and again; they try to do what works. If you play sports, this is what we do, right? If you’re in the basketball playoffs and there’s a mismatch in the post, what play is the coach going to call? Give it to the big guy all day long. If you’re playing volleyball and there’s one woman in the back corner who can’t return a serve, where are you going to serve it? At her until it’s game, set, and match. If you’re in an argument with someone that you’re really trying to win, what are you going to do? You’re going to find the weakness in their side of the story and you’re going to push it until the argument is over. If you play video games and it’s been an all-weekend binge and you finally get to the final level and there’s the boss, what do you do? You find the one thing that works and you hit that button again and again and again and again. When you try to win, when you try to conquer an opponent, you just find the one thing and you keep doing what works.

I’ll tell you, I want you to think about that idea because you and I are in a spiritual battle. Jesus said that we have a real enemy and his intentions are wicked and diabolical and purely evil. Our Good Shepherd said that the devil is the Father of Lies and he wants to steal and kill and destroy. He wants to take your faith, he wants to rob you of obedience, and he wants to destroy your family, your friendships, and your connection to your church. He wants to take away your very soul and what does he do? All day long, he asks a single question: What works? He sends his demons to listen in on conversations and they’re just looking for the answer to a single question: What works? What works with you and with me? The answers might be different but that’s all he cares about—what works? Because once he finds out, he’ll tempt with that bait day after day, year after year, until he has what he wants.

I know it’s a very heavy topic to think about as a Christian family, but I want you to think about it so the blessings of God can be yours tomorrow. So maybe the good things that were taken away from you today and yesterday and the whole last year could be different. I want the promises of God—so beautiful and so freeing, the promises of his grace and mercy—to be things that you don’t doubt or worry about or question. I want to give you back the life that Jesus intended; the life that Jesus says is an abundant life, a life lived to the full, a life lived in grace.

So, today as we think about that question—what works—I want to go back to a story of perhaps the biggest fish that the Father of Lies ever caught. Not just one of the nameless people in the crowds who followed Jesus, but one of his inner circle, one of his closest friends, the man named Judas. Now, if you know much about the Bible, you probably think you know a lot about Judas but I would question that assumption. Two thousand years later, we think of Judas as the greedy, money-hungry, backstabbing betrayer of the Son of God. But as you read the gospels, the biographies of Jesus, you meet a man who by all outward standards looked good. And when Jesus preached, sometimes people were too busy, they had weddings to plan for, they had businesses to take care of, they would not give up everything to follow Jesus but Judas did. He left behind his job, he left behind his comfort, and he left behind his home to walk in Jesus’ footsteps for three years. Unlike the apostle Peter, Judas did not suffer from foot-in-mouth disease. Unlike James and John, he didn’t seem to have major anger problems in his heart. When the enemies of Jesus tried to find a way to trap him, they didn’t think of Judas. Judas initially approached them, not vice versa. There seemed to be no flaws in his

character. In fact, when Jesus predicted time after time after time in the gospels “*one of you will betray me,*” there weren’t 11 heads that turned and looked at Judas and said: “Well, obviously!”

You see, Judas was a good guy with a little problem; a problem that doesn’t really appear until much later in the gospel. But once the devil found out the problem, once he realized what would work, he kicked that door open until Judas actually sold out God’s one and only son. And the first hint that the devil got happened in John 12. One of Jesus’ friends, Martha, threw this dinner party and the smell of the food filled her home but then there was another scent that filled their nostrils; the scent of exquisite and expensive perfume. There was Jesus’ friend, Mary, at his feet and she broke open a bottle that the Bible said cost 300 days’ wages. Can you imagine? This is tens of thousands of dollars being poured out for an experience that would last, what, a few minutes? And as Jesus smelled this incredibly generous offering, Judas had something to say. When he spoke, it wasn’t just Jesus that heard his words; it was the enemy, the tempter.

But listen what happened in John 12: “*But one of the disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray Jesus, objected. ‘Why wasn’t this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year’s wages.’ He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it.*” The love of money is one of the strongest temptations and it was what worked with Judas. Maybe he thought he deserved it after leaving everything behind. Maybe he just took a little off the top because he had the extra responsibility of being Jesus’ church treasurer. We don’t know; we just know that it worked. And a few days later, it worked in the worst way: “*Then Satan entered Judas, called Iscariot, one of the twelve. And Judas went to the chief priest and the officers of the temple guard and discussed with them how he might betray Jesus. They were delighted and agreed to give him money.*”

Satan, in some mysterious way, enters into Judas’ heart. He leads his footsteps right to Jesus’ enemies and they work out a negotiation; 30 silver coins. Most Bible scholars think that’s about \$200. But the Father of Lies lied to Judas: You get the money and Jesus will go free. Remember the last time when the crowds tried to seize him? He just walked right through it; he can work a miracle again. Jesus ends up safe and sound and you put a little extra in your pockets; it’s win win. He thought it would work. But if you know the rest of the story, it didn’t. Judas led the enemies into the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus was arrested. He ended up on a cross and Judas realized the lie. He ran back with remorse gushing out of his heart. He threw the money back, he begged for mercy, but the callous enemies of Jesus had none. And just when you think Judas had escaped the lie, the devil switched the bait. He went from the excuser of sin to the accuser of sinners. You sold out the Son of God? You traded in the priceless Savior for a few hundred dollars? You are so disgusting! You are so wretched. Why don’t you kill yourself? And he bit. He took the bait, he tied the rope, and Satan twice in a row did exactly what worked.

So what do we learn from the sad story of Judas Iscariot? Simply this: The Father of Lies does what works. He could care less if you and I keep nine of the Ten Commandments as long as there’s one that always works. As long as he can find a certain kind of bait and as long as we bite, that’s all that he needs. And thinking that is really helpful for me because I bet a lot of you, just like me, are confused by the sins that other people commit. If you’ve ever had a friend or family member or a co-worker do something that’s wrong and sinful and you just can’t understand why they do it and then they do it again and they do it again. Are any of you driven, goal-setting kind of person? If so, isn’t the sin of laziness really confusing? You just want to say to people in our country, maybe people in your own home, your own children, like: “What? This isn’t that hard. You know, I left you a to-do list of three things and all you did was sleep until noon and play Xbox? Why don’t you fill out an application? Why don’t you get off of the couch? Why don’t you do something? It’s not really that difficult.”

Or if you’re a person who’s pretty laidback and you go with the flow and changes in the schedule don’t really bother you, you aren’t stressed out, like angry people are totally baffling. It’s traffic; take a deep breath. Rumor has it there are other cars that drive on these same roads. Your kid spilled the glass of milk; it’s going to be cleaned up in 30 seconds. Why we are going to ruin dinner over a simple accident is confusing.

If you're a bubbly extrovert who always sees that the glass is half-full, isn't depression and anxiety really confusing, too? Like why don't you just count your blessings? Why don't you snap out of it? Why don't you think about all the good things that God has given to you? If you're a thoughtful introvert, don't people who talk too much confuse you? Like are you the only one in the room who doesn't realize that no one is enjoying the sound of your voice right now? If you never struggled with alcohol, isn't alcoholism just baffling? Like you're destroying your body, you're destroying our family, you're destroying our life. Why don't you just stop it?

Sometimes other people's sins are really confusing until you think about that. Well, the reason it's confusing is because that bait doesn't work with you and it doesn't have to. Why would Satan tempt you with something that won't work? He doesn't care if you don't struggle with that; he just wants to make sure you struggle with this. As long as this works. You see, this teaching gives us compassion. Your children's struggle, your neighbor's struggle, your enemy's struggle might be incredibly different. Their sin might not make any sense to you but your sin probably doesn't make sense to them. The temptation is different because the devil does what works.

So let me ask you a personal question: What works with you? If you were trying to get you, tempt you, lead you away from God. If you were trying to trick you into doubting his promises, disobeying his commandments, what would you do to catch you? I wonder if for a lot of us here today the answer might be what Jesus said was the devil's best bait; something so powerful that Judas himself, one of Jesus' closest friends, got caught. Didn't many of us here today struggle with the love of money? I know that's a sensitive subject in church, isn't it? Some of you might have had toxic experiences when guys like me open up a Bible and guilt and shame and twist your arm into giving more money but I just want to tell you, today is not that; not that at all. If you want to see my rusted out van with 200,000 plus miles, you can check it out if you want. I've worn the same shirts preaching at my church 152 Sundays in a row. So this is not about me getting money from you. No, this is me trying to help you because Jesus, in Matthew 6, he once said this: "*You cannot serve both God and money.*" Jesus knew that the number one competitor for your heart would be money. He knew, as one pastor later said, that the last thing to be changed in a Christian's life would be his wallet. And why do you think that is?

You know, in some parts of the world that would make total sense, wouldn't it? When you have nothing—when you walk miles to get water, when you live without electricity, when you don't have safety or security, but here, in America, how's that even possible? How can we have more and make more than any culture in human history and still be so scared of not having enough? Why is it so easy for so many of us to spend and to save and to invest but to give—like to give a real percentage of our wealth to the poor that God loves so much? To give a crazy percentage to bless the spread of the gospel without being afraid that we won't have enough tomorrow for our daily needs and for a happy life, how can that be?

I think I know: Because the devil knows what works. And he knows that money is the perfect replacement for God in our hearts. Just think of all the things that money seems to promise us; the things that all of us, to the last man, woman, and child here today, crave. Like all of us want to be safe, don't we? We want to know that tomorrow's going to be a good day. We want respect. We want to feel good about the way that we look. We want pleasure and entertainment instead of sadness and depression. And doesn't money seem like the perfect answer to all of those desires? Do you not like what you see in the mirror? What if you had more money? What if you went shopping? What if you could afford a personal trainer, a chef to make you healthy meals, you could be beautiful if you had money! You want respect? Buy a convertible, a corvette, pull up downtown to a stoplight and just watch the envy in their eyes. If you have money, you can get respect. You want to have fun, entertainment and pleasure? If you gave me six figures, I could have a lot of fun today. Think of the vacations, the places that you could see, the things that you could buy, the beautiful home that you could live in. Do you want to know that tomorrow's going to be okay? Well, if you had a savings account and an emergency account for your savings account, if you had a retirement that even a tanking economy couldn't

touch, money seems like the perfect thing, doesn't it? And he makes us afraid; afraid we won't be able to pay for tuition or braces. That we won't have enough money to pay the mortgage or buy food, we won't be able to retire, we panic, we think about it, we worry and the devil smiles. Because you don't need to be addicted to pornography; you just need the one thing that works.

So do you know your one thing? Is it the fear of not having enough? Is it a sexual sin? Is it an argumentative spirit defending your position, wanting to be right instead of wanting to be righteous? Is it the thoughts that come into your heart when you see a person of another race or another culture? What works?

Because once you know what that one thing is, you can defend yourself. Once you've figured out the thing that works, you can come up with a battle plan to lift up the shield of faith and the sword of the spirit. So if in your heart today you figured out what that one thing is, I want to offer you some advice.

First of all, resist him. If you know what sin works for temptation, I want you to resist him, and trust God. Our sermon text says: "*Resist the devil and he will flee from you*" (7). Maybe you've heard of the great Lutheran song A Mighty Fortress Is Our God? Martin Luther, who wrote that about 500 years ago, had this little line; he said: "One little word can fell him." If you want to drop the devil to his knees, if you want to rob him of all his power, all you need is one little word. And for years and years, I thought the little word was "Jesus" or "love" or "grace." But one person wrote that wasn't the word Luther was thinking of. Do you know what it was? "Liar." If you want the devil to run from you, all you need to say is this word: Liar! When the temptation comes to expose him, to realize that there is a hook beneath that beautiful and tasty bait, the devil can't stand it and he will look for someone who doesn't realize the lie.

So can I ask you today to not just think that word in your heart but when you feel temptation, when that one thing tries to get you again, to speak it out loud: Liar! Oh, another drink is going to be good for me? You liar! Trying to get my way and be right in this argument. No, no, no, you liar! God's not listening to me anymore because I sin too much? You liar! I have to carry about this shame and guilt because of what happened yesterday? You liar! I'm not going to have enough for tomorrow? You point an invisible finger in the devil's face and call him what he is, a liar, and he can't stand it. It will drop him to his knees. He will run away and fish for someone else. Resist him.

And number two: Repent and trust God for forgiveness. James 4 says: "*Come near to God, and he will come near you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded people. Lament, mourn, and weep. Let your laughter be changed into mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and he will lift you up*" (8-10). Do you want to be healed of that temptation? Do you want tomorrow to be different? Then here's the power source: Repent and trust God. Unlike the Father of Lies, your Father in heaven cannot lie. And incredible things he has said to you in his word have to be true. So when the Bible says God so loved the world, the world includes you! When Romans 8 says there is nothing in all of creation that can separate you from the love that God has for you in Christ Jesus, it has to be true. When Jeremiah 31 says that God doesn't just forgive our wickedness, he remembers our sins no more, can you even imagine that? God, I'm so sorry about yesterday. What happened yesterday? That when God thinks of you, he doesn't think about the mess, the struggle, the temptation, the sin. We might think of it, we might drag it with us, but God has separated that from us as far as the east is from the west. When God says through the Old Testament prophets that he delights in us, like he doesn't just put up with us, he doesn't let us just sneak in the backdoor of heaven because he has to because he's God. Instead, his face beams. Have you heard that blessing that we sometimes say in church? "The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine upon you." You know how my face shines towards my kids? When I'm happy with them. Why does God's face shine on you? Because he's happy with you.

So tell the devil to go back to the hellhole that he came from. Your Father in heaven is pleased with you and that will never change because of what Jesus did. Resist him, you liar. And trust your Father; he can't lie to you.

So knowing that Satan's coming after you personally and that he's custom designing his approach to take great advantage of your own personal weaknesses, what do you do? There really is only one really good answer: The word of God gives us what we need. The word of God gives us the wisdom we need to think straight. The word of God gives us the love and backbone so that we can live with our lives what we know in our heads to be true.

Let's pray today, shall we, for strength in temptation: Heavenly Father, we come to you today and ask for your protection; the protection of your holy angels to keep us safe from the attacks of Satan and his demons but also the power and protection of your word. Let your spirit speak to us through your word and give us ears to hear and hearts to believe so that we will grow wiser, knowing the difference between right and wrong and grow stronger and have the back bone to say no to things that would destroy our relationships with our family and places of work and friends and, worst of all, with you. Make us strong and wise through your word, O Father, for we pray it in Jesus' name. Amen.